

John Bellers in Official Minutes

JN the long list of Quaker prophets there are few more worthy of our remembrance than John Bellers. He was as a voice crying in the wilderness, calling the world to repent of its sin against the existing social order, and to discover in the "labour of the poor the mines of the rich," which are, he says, of far greater worth than all the silver of Spain. It is in order to throw some little light on the life and work of John Bellers that the following extracts—chiefly from MS. minutes of the various Meetings of the Society of Friends, have been brought together. Possibly, as a result, others may be encouraged in the quest for further information regarding this remarkable man, so that he may receive his rightful place amongst those we honour and love as the bearers of the light in ages past.

John Bellers, born 1654, was the son of well-to-do parents, Francis and Mary Bellers. According to his marriage certificate (in **D.**) his father was a grocer and citizen of the City of London, though research has failed to elicit the name of the Company of which he was a member, or how he acquired citizenship, whether by patrimony, apprenticeship or purchase.

The earliest mention of Francis Bellers on official minutes is on those of the Six Weeks Meeting under date 1671, and in subsequent years he held various appointments.

In 1677 he was one of a Committee set apart to consider "the bussiness about ye ground for a Meeteing place for Devonshire house," and ". . . to conclude with the Doctor as they see meete."

Other references show Francis Bellers to have been a Trustee for Long Acre Burying Ground and also for a meeting place at Westminster. He also held responsible appointments on the Meeting for Sufferings. He probably died towards the close of 1679, and it is interesting to find that his son John soon after took up the work laid down by his father, his name

appearing as present at Meeting for Sufferings in First Month, 1680/81. Thus John Bellers, a young man of about twenty-six, would be brought into contact with many prominent members of the Society; at his first meeting George Fox was also present. It may be that the Meeting for Sufferings formed his first introduction to Giles Fettiplace of Coln St. Aldwyns, who afterwards became his father-in-law. They were both present at meetings in 1682 and 1683.

Between the years 1673 and 1683 persecution against Friends increased; and the minutes of the Meeting for Sufferings reveal the care and pains taken to assist and relieve. John Bellers appears to have been specially under appointment on behalf of Yorkshire Friends.

The work of dealing with Sufferings occasioned a good deal of deputation work; Judges, Members of Parliament, and King were all in turn interviewed in the interests of Friends, and John Bellers had his due share of this important service. For instance, on the 6th of Eighth Month, 1682, he is appointed to see Judge Atkins respecting York prison; while on the 6th of Ninth Month he is one of three to go and speak to the Earl of Yarmouth about Norwich Meeting House doors being broken down, and Friends kept out of their Meeting.

As correspondent for Yorkshire Bellers came into contact with individual sufferers. On the 4th of Third Month, 1683, he gives account of a Friend at Whitby under suffering, and he is asked to write to him and encourage him. Leeds Friends appear to have undergone considerable persecution, and Bellers is asked on the 11th of Eleventh Month to write to them an answer *re* their sufferings, and again on the 8th of Sixth Month, 1684. It would be interesting to know if any of these letters are extant, for, judging from the only one we have traced, they would surely be of a very interesting and consoling character.

From the year 1683 to the end of the decade, John Bellers is on constant appointment, but our aim in this article must be to indicate where information may be found rather than to multiply extracts.

The interest of John Bellers in the care of the poor in the Society of Friends seems to have been developed

soon after he took up active work in the Society, for in 1679 we find him treasurer of a fund for employing the poor.

The following minutes being of such an interesting character, and illustrating a side of the Society's activities but little known, are given in full. At the Six Weeks Meeting held the 13th of First Month, 1676/7,

Agreed that the Meeting of twelve doe pay to William Meade 100 pounds out of ye Annuity money in their hands to bee employed as a stock to buy flax to imploy poore freinds in spinning. W^m Meade haveing vndertaken for one yeare to buy the flax & to take care to manage the bussines in supplying each person appointed to receive the flax for each Monthly Meeting wth their proportions and to pay the Spinners, & deliver the yarn to the Weauer, & to keep an acc^t what is expended.

John Osgood & James Claypoole added to Assist W^m Meade in buying the said flax or in any thing else to carry on the work what they can.

Friends were appointed in each Monthly Meeting to receive the flax from William Meade and to dispose of the same. A change is made on 3rd of Tenth Month, 1678, when the following minute is recorded :

It being proposed by the Women freinds that Margery Browne might be the person appointed to sort the flax, & deliver it to the spinners & to ouersee the spinners, & to direct them in their work, It was agreed that shee be imployed in it for the present, and when the Cloth in ffancis Moores hands is vallued & ready for Sale he is desired to acquaint freinds of it, that it may be sold and it is further agreed yt ffrances Poulsted & Mary Ellis doe assist Margery Browne in her service.

A further reference to the business is found in minutes of the 1st of Fifth Month, 1679, when it is resolved

That Jn^o Osgood & Wm. Mead advise ye ffrds concernd in ye Linnen Trade & Agree with Anne Whitehead and ye others concern'd about ye same.

Again, on the 27th of Eleventh Month, 1679, the following minute is recorded :

William Mead reporting he has one hundred pounds giuen to the stock for setting the poore at worke freinds doe agree that the same be disposed of by the freinds formerly appointed for the said service & to apply them selues to this meeting for aduice at all times as there is occasion : they haue chosen John Bellars to keep the account thereof : and the cash wherein they haue the consent of this meeting.

John Bellers, at this time twenty-five years of age, is a merchant dealing in cloth, the Women's Box Meeting having an account with him in 1680 for "cloth 42 elles att 15^d p elle for poors shifts, 002 12 6."

An account is brought in to the Six Weeks Meeting on the 4th of Twelfth Month, 1683/4, of about £22 in Frances Polsted's hand and about £40 in John Bellers' hand, for employing the poor, "they desiring to know into whose hands it shall be paid." This Meeting agrees that George Barr and Gilbert Macey take an account of the whole proceeds of the trade of John Bellers and Frances Polsted and bring it to next meeting.

Their decision is that fifty pounds shall be paid to "ye poors money keepers," and Ann Whitehead is to dispose of the remainder to women Friends. On the 14th of Eighth Month, 1684, the following minute occurs:

fifty pounds of ye poors money out of the stock of ye spinning trade is brought in by John Bellers to ye Meeting yt keeps ye poors money.

John Bellers and Frances Fettiplace were married at the Meeting House at Cirencester, 2nd of Ninth Month, 1686.

The original marriage certificate is signed by members of the two families and also by William Penn, Thomas Perry, Oliver Sansom, William Bowly and Thomas Loveday. It would appear that John and his wife went to live in London, for a son was born to them there on the 23rd of Eighth Month, 1687, who was named Fettiplace.¹

For some years, probably from 1690 to 1701, they made their home at the Grange, Chalfont St. Peters, the former abode of Isaac Penington, for there at least four children were born to them,² and registered at Jordans Meeting House. Here John Bellers was brought into touch with John Penington and Thomas Ellwood. Several papers concerning disciplinary measures are preserved bearing all three names; one such, dated 5th of Seventh Month, 1692, relates to honesty in dealing, and is issued by the

¹ The birth of the daughter Mary has not been traced on the Registers, but as she died 1751, aged 62, she must have been born about 1689, possibly while her parents were still living in London.

² Elizabeth Bellers, 28/6/1690; Theophila Bellers, 18/8/1692; Francis Bellers, 20/10/1693; Theophila Bellers, 5/9/1695.

Monthly Meeting for the Upperside of Bucks; at the same meeting John Bellers signs a paper showing that one John White is clear of all others regarding marriage, but is "a man of a weak head scarce able to bear a Draught of strong Drink."

On the 1st of Eighth Month, 1694, High Wycombe Meeting state they are in some straits regarding the expense of a lame Friend of Thame Meeting, Frances Stevens by name, who had been a great charge on that Meeting, she being supposed to be under a distemper called "The Evil," payments for her amounted to £13 1s. 6d. A Friend, Alexander Merrick, had laid out £5 10s. 0d. and was in need of it.

The meeting not having any other stock, out of which to repay Alex: Merrick . . . John Bellers offered to lay down the £5 10. 0. in the behalf of Wiccomb Meeting until the friends of that meeting can raise it, w^{ch} they let him know they thought would not be long. Wherefore John Bellers was desired to pay that mony to Alex: Merrick as soon as he can, in discharge of the case of Frances Steevens.

On the 3rd of Fourth Month, 1695,

John Bellers acquainted the Meeting that one John Askew (a young Man in y^e Profession of Truth) who formerly lived with him as a servant, & some time since went to live in Pensilvania, but did not take care to get a Certificate to carry with him, hath now (by his ffather, who is likewise going to live there) sent to desire a Certificate from this meeting, with respect to his clearness from engagem^{ts} relating to marriage, & to his Conversation while he lived in this Country.

Appointments for enquiry were made, and at the next meeting a certificate was sent.

On the 7th of Eighth Month, 1695, J. Bellers, with John Penington and Thomas Ellwood and others, is appointed to assist Wycombe Friends in dealing with one Mary Pearce who had brought a great scandal upon Truth.

Various appeals for money are signed by John Bellers, one for loss by fire for one James Smith of Aylesbury in 1692, for two fires in 1698, an appeal issued by Quarterly Meeting at request of Yearly Meeting in 1698 regarding distress in Scotland due to "general failure of crops in that Kingdom for three years."

All the references stamp John Bellers as one broad in his sympathies, with a love for the purity of the Quaker

faith and practice, and as one dealing as a faithful steward with the wealth which God had committed to his care. Apparently John Bellers went to live at Coln St. Aldwyns about the time of Mary Fettiplace's death, 27 iii. 1700/1, for a minute recorded by Gloucester Quarterly Meeting,³ 27th of Third Month, 1701, reads:

Giles Fettiplace of Coln Allwins sent by his son in law John Bellers to acquaint this meeting that he would give £100 if they would order five Friends to take £20 each at interest to be paid to the Quarterly Meeting for the use of the poor of the people called Quakers in the County of Gloucester, and if any of the money should be lost the Quarterly Meeting is to make it up again out of the interest. So Friends returns him due acknowledgements for his love and care and do kindly accept of it leaving it at present to farther consideration and management.

It is rather suggestive that the first mention of John Bellers in this Quarterly Meeting should be dealing with the care of the poor. At the same meeting held at Nailsworth, 27 iii. 1701, Bellers tries to get Gloucestershire Friends to undertake a scheme for a workhouse, and the following minute is recorded:

John Bellers proposed to this meeting of setting up a Public Workhouse for poor Friends its generally agreed to be a very good thing and its left in consideration till next meeting, and in the meantime its desired that Robert Neale, Tho Sturge, Abram Lloyd, Robt White, Nath Roberts, John Bellers, Saml Simons, Robert Langny, John Curtis and Wm Worme should go to see Bristol Workhouse and give a report to next meeting, how they approve of it.

At the next meeting, held at Sudbury 20th of Sixth Month, 1701, report is made that the £100 is received from Giles Fettiplace, and that five Friends have taken it at 5 per cent., and John Bellers is appointed one of the trustees for the same. John Bellers' proposals for a workhouse were again considered, and

It is agreed to leave it in consideration till next meeting, and that John Bellers be desired to be there, and that in the meantime he might draw up some proposals if he think fit. Nathaniel Roberts to acquaint him of it.

We can find no other mention on the Gloucestershire minutes of John Bellers, or of any further steps to promote his idea of a workhouse after this date, so apparently the scheme was not proceeded with.

³ The extracts printed from the Gloucester minutes have not been checked with the originals [EDS.].

There are evidences of varied service in the minutes of the Meeting for Twelve, or, as it was for some time called, "the Meeting that keeps the poors stock." From these, under date 15th of First Month, 1679/80, we learn that John Bellers was a Trustee of the Park Meeting House, Southwark, he being described as a Merchant in London. And from the Second Day's Morning Meeting minute of 30th of Ninth Month, 1696, we find that John Bellers and others are appointed to read Friends' books: they are instructed "to Collect such places as they find proper to clear ffrids from the Callumnies that are cast upon them with respect to y^e severall Doctrines hereafter mentioned," of which a long list is given. The Committee met on the 3rd of Tenth Month, 1696, and sketched out the plan of their work, John Bellers having the books by William Bayly to read.

John Bellers, like so many of the early Friends, was the subject of persecution. He was arrested at Gracechurch Street on the 7th of Seventh Month, 1684, was taken to the Exchange and kept there from ten o'clock in the morning until five in the evening, when with others he was brought before the Mayor, and was bailed out by relatives or acquaintances. At the next Sessions he was fined four nobles, the fine being paid by some acquaintances in Court. He was again arrested on the 16th of November, 1684, and again fined four nobles, which is again paid by someone in Court. On the 11th of February, 1685, Bellers, along with nine others, was taken from Devonshire House Meeting, and at the Sessions following they were indicted for a riot and fined thirteen shillings and fourpence each.

John Bellers, as a Fellow of the Royal Society, came into contact with the famous physician Sir Hans Sloane, and the following letter⁴—here published for the first time—shows the closeness of the friendship, and also reveals somewhat the character of the writer :

Cowne Allins, 5th of Eighth Month, 1724.

I am heartily sorry for thy loss of thy lady which I found by the loss of mine, with a love seven years ago, is not small, but if we can draw nearer to God, and find the greater acquaintance with him as we lose

⁴ Sloane MSS. 4047 fol. 208 (British Museum).

our friends and relations we shall make a happy exchange, for if they dont go from us we must go from them, because we must part as sure as we are born. The Lord make up thy loss with his love and peace in thy soul.

John Bellers then consults Sir Hans regarding some disorder from which he was suffering, concluding with

I will pay thee a fee when [I] see thee. Please to direct for me at Colone Allins by the Northleach Bay in Gloucester. I expect this will be with thee next 4th day Wensday, and if thee please to favour me with on[e] the next post, it will be with me next 7th day Saturday Morning. Wishing thee health, with kind respects,

I rest thy sincere and obleiged friend,

JOHN BELLERS.

My man and chambermaid were married here this morning.

Persuant to my treating the poor prisoners with baked beef I yesterday treated 58 of my poorer neighbours with the same fare, much [to] their satisfaction and but about 3^d head cost.

CHARLES R. SIMPSON.

To be continued.

Deputation to Queen Victoria on Her Accession¹

My Dear Girls,²

I suppose you rec^d the newspaper I sent, I thought by the rec^t of that you would find I had arrived safe in town, which I did after a pleasant sail, with the exception of some showers, & in sending it I thought also you would like to see the account of the Queens proroguing parliament, & also the Petition of Frds in Ireland.

I may now inform you that on my arrival I went to W^m Manley's & found the address was to be presented on 6th day (this day) but that Lord John Russell objected

¹ Description given by William Doubleday in a letter to his daughters. Original in the possession of his grandson, Edward Doubleday of Coggeshall, whose sister, Edith M. Doubleday, has kindly supplied the notes.

For further particulars *re* Deputation, see *Souvenir of The Address to King Edward VII.*, 1901, by J. J. Green, p. 59.

² William Doubleday had three daughters: Mary, 1806-1824, Elizabeth, b. 1812, Anna, b. 1818. Thus the letter was addressed to Elizabeth and Anna.